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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on an investigation of an increasing tendency in modern German to use the second person singular imperative without the suffix "e." All major works on German grammar, including the standard reference books on the subject, require this suffix for all weak and most strong verbs. (Those verbs which change their stem vowel from "e" to "i" do not fall into this category.) In a survey, 107 mostly young people from many locations were interviewed. There was an oral and written test of 14 verbs; results revealed that the use of the singular imperative (the "Du"-form, in the group of verbs used) follows the tendency to drop the suffix only to some extent and in differing degrees. Those verbs which change their stem vowel always show a zero ending in the imperative. However, some verbs, particularly those with consonant clusters in their stems, adhere to the traditional rule for the singular imperative of infinitive stem plus "e." Other verbs reflect the tendency toward omission of the suffix. Texts should be updated on the basis of the standard language as used by the educated German public. (Author/HW)

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Modifications in the Formation of the German Imperative

This paper is based on research I did in Germany during the summer of 1971. With the help of a questionnaire and a tape recorder I conducted a survey in various parts of Germany and Austria, and interviewed a total of 107 persons. The purpose of my project was to investigate the extent of an increasing tendency in modern everyday German to use the second person singular imperative without the suffix "e".

All major works on German grammar, including the standard reference books on the subject, require this suffix in the second person singular imperative for all verbs concerned, that is, for all weak and most strong verbs. However, those verbs which change their stem vowel in the conjugation from "e" to "i", for example: "ich gebe, du gibst," do not fall into the above category. Their second person singular imperative is always formed without a suffix.

The corresponding rules found, for instance, in the West German Duden Grammatik state that in the formal language (gehobene Sprache) most verbs have the suffix "e", e.g.: "Hans, trinke ein Glas Milch." In the colloquial language (Umgangssprache), however, the suffix is usually dropped, e.g.: "Hans, trink ein Glas Milch." The volume of the Kleine Enzyklopaedie, entitled: Die deutsche Sprache (published in East Germany), carries a similar entry on the subject: "The singular of the imperative is formed with the suffix "e". In the literary language (Schriftsprache), but especially in the colloquial language, the suffix may be dropped for reasons of rhythm, or because of the sound environment, for instance: 'Komm her, hör auf, bleib hier!"

Johannes Erben, in his Abriss der deutschen Grammatik (p. 67) explains that as a rule the singular imperative has the ending "e", e.g.: "dränge dich nicht vor, lüge nicht." This suffix is frequently dropped, depending on the stem ending of the verb and the text, for instance: "bleib, komm, hör, lauf." Walter Jung, in his Grammatik der deutschen Sprache, formulates the problem as follows: "Today the singular form in the standard language (Hochsprache) carries the ending "e" for both weak and strong verbs--unless they are subject to the stem vowel change e/i. In most instances the "e" is dropped in the colloquial language, both in weak and strong verbs." And Gerhard Wahrig, in the Lexikon der deutschen Sprachlehre (Deutsches Worterbuch), comments that while in the colloquial language the "e" is often dropped, its omission in the written language should be permitted only for rhythmical reasons, e.g. in poetry."

As can be seen from the above-mentioned sources, the suffix "e" is required in the second person singular imperative in the standard language, especially in writing.

In my survey I tried to establish whether this theory still agrees with the present usage of the imperative, especially among the younger generation. Of the 107 persons interviewed, 79 were between the ages of 15-29. The other 28 were between 30 and 77 years of age. Of the total number of interviewees, 9 had received their doctoral degrees, 39 were university students of whom 20 studied Germanic lahguages, 10 had graduated from high school, and the remaining 29 had not gone beyond intermediate school.

The geographic distribution of the persons interviewed included

the following locations: Berlin, Leipzig, Wien, Graz, Salzburg, München, Stuttgart, Baden-Baden, Mannheim, Karlsruhe, Frankfurt, Bonn, Münster, Göttingen, Hannover and Hamburg.

For the survey I used a xeroxed form with 15 brief sentences. The verb of each sentence was given in the infinitive form, and the individuals were asked first to read the sentence, using the proper imperative form of the corresponding infinitive; this was recorded on tape. Then they had to insert the imperative on the same questionnaire in writing. The first step served to test the oral or colloquial use of the imparative, the second the written or literary use.

The 14 verbs used in the study project were: Kommen, sagen, arbeiten, bleiben, öffnen, fragen, schreiben, warten, erzählen, reden, gehen, sitzen, denken, trinken.

The results of my research among the 107 persons interviewed on the contemporary use of the singular imperative of the above verbs were as follows:

Verb number one--kommen (which ranks very high on the frequency list of words)--was used orally with the suffix "e", that is, "komme," by only five persons; but with zero ending, that is, "komm," by 102. Also in writing only a small minority--18 persons--used the same imperative with the suffix, as against 89 persons who used it without the ending. This means that of the total of 107 interviewees, only 5 used the suffix "e" for the verb "kommen" both orally and in writing. None of the persons contacted used the suffix orally, but omitted it in writing. However, 13 persons omitted the suffix orally, yet retained it in writing.

To demonstrate a rather different situation, let us look at the verb "arbeiten," that is, verb number 3 on the chart. Here the situation is practically reversed, because verbs which end in the consonant "t"

normally add the suffix "e" to the stem. (Explanation according to chart.)

The case is similar with the verb "warten," number eight on the chart, where the stem again ends in "t" (in German a dental plosive). The verb "reden," number ten, is treated slightly differently, because it has a voiced dental plosive.

The results shown on the chart indicate that the use of the singular imperative, or the "Du"-form, in the group of verbs discussed, follow the tendency to drop the suffix only to some extent and in differing degrees. Here we are facing an assimilation process with those verbs which change their stem vowel "e" to "i", and always show a zero ending in the imperative, for instance: "nehmen--nimm, sprechen--sprich, lesen--liess," and so on. However, there are some verbs which always adhere to the traditional rule for the singular imperative of infinitive stem plus "e". This applies particularly to verbs with consonant clusters in their stem, for instance, "öffnen," verb number five on the chart. Other verbs in this category are: "atmen," with the imperative "atme"; "ändern," with the imperative "ändere"; and "handeln," with the imperative "handle."

The above facts, while indicating a tendency in the use of the imperative toward omission of the suffix in certain cases and by various groups of persons, contradict the rules concerning the singular imperative contained in several German textbooks published in this country. For instance, one such source states only: "The verb stem is used for the Du-form of the imperative." Another textbook says: "The ending "e" of the Du-form is optional." Obviously such rules are both inadequate and confusing. They not only fail to consider verbs with consonant clusters in their stem, but they totally ignore the requirements of the standard language used by the educated German public.

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The verbs used in the survey are:

(1)kommen (2)sagen (3) arbeiten (4) bleiben (5) öffnen (6) fragen (7) schreiben
(8)warten (9)erzählen (10)reden (11)gehen (12)sitzen (13)denken (14)trinken

(In English:

(1)to come (2)to say (3)to work (4)to stay (5)to open (6)to ask (7) to write
(8)to wait (9)to tell (10)to talk (11)to go (12)to sit (13)to think (14) to drink)

The following chart represents the overall result of my research on the contemporary use of the singular imperative of the above verbs, with or without the suffix -e (hereafter referred to as -e, or -ø).

Verb No.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
The 107 interviewees have used the above verbs in singular imperative as follows:														
1. Orally, with -e	5	24	101	24	107	50	37	96	60	86	25	30	47	33
2. Orally, -ø	102	83	6	83	-	57	70	11	47	21	82	77	60	74
3. In writing, with -e	18	47	103	42	107	56	51	101	69	90	41	41	56	35
4. In writing, -ø	89	60	4	65	-	51	56	6	38	17	66	66	51	72
5. Orally & in writing, with -e	5	23	99	21	107	39	31	95	55	80	23	27	40	23
6. Orally & in writing, -ø	89	59	2	62	-	38	50	5	33	13	64	63	43	61
7. Orally, with -e; in writing, -ø	-	1	2	3	-	13	6	1	5	5	2	3	8	10
8. Orally, -ø; in writing, with -e	13	24	4	21	-	17	20	6	14	9	18	14	16	13